Irfan Ahmed The state in Islamist thought

Abstract

This paper argues that the reason why the state became central to Islamism was not because Islam, unlike other religions, supposedly fails to distinguish between religion and state. Rather it was because of the impact of early twentieth century socio-political formations. The paper bases its arguments on an examination of the views of Islamist ideologue and founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami in India, Abut ala Maududi.

The vast literature on political Islam predominantly offers the following explanation for centrality of 'state' in the discourse of Islamists: the state is pivotal to Islamism because, unlike other religions, Islam (as a faith) does not make a distinction between religion and state. Put differently, the argument asserts that since it fuses religion and politics, the idea of a state naturally flows from the very character of Islam. In Ernest Gellner's view, Islam has a lack in so far as, in contradistinction to Christianity, it failed to enact a separation between religion and politics. So pervasive is this argument that it invariably informs the writings of scholars such as Louis Dumont, Bernard Lewis, Bassam Tibi, Montgomery Watt, and Myron Weiner. Perhaps as a reaction to this, some scholars have taken the pain to demonstrate the opposite. Egyptian Ali Abd al-Raziq and Said al-Ashmawy, as well as the Indian theologian Wahiddudin Khan, for instance, con-tend that Islam **does** distinguish religion from state and that the latter is not important to it as a faith. On the face of it, both these positions look radically antagonistic. However, a closer scrutiny shows their basic similarity: both arguments parade a theological logic. In different ways, the proponents of both positions quote, *inter alia*, Qur'an and hadith to prove their respective arguments.

In this article, I call into question the validity of the theological approach to the issue of state and Islamism. I argue instead that the reason why the state became central to Islamism was not because Islam theologically entailed it. Rather it did so because of the configuration of the early twentieth century socio-political formations under which the state as an institution had acquired an unprecedented role in expanding its realm of action and scope of its effect. Since Islamism was a

response to the modern state formation with its far-reaching consequences it was only logical that the state became the centre of its discourse. Thus it was not due to Islamic theology that the state became central to Islamism; on the contrary, it was the unusual expansion of the early twentieth century state and its imprint on almost every domain of life that drove Islamists to make the state central to theology. To substantiate my argument, I will discuss the writings of Abut Ala Maududi (1903-79). Arguably, he is the foremost ideologue of Islamism. Founder of the Jamaat-e-Islami in India, Maududi's appeal has crossed the frontiers of India to influence Islamist movements in the Arab world, prominent amongst whom is Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood and its ideologue, Sayyid Qutb. Here I will show how Maududi's theoretical elaboration about Islam being synonymous with the state was enmeshed in and a direct product of the political-electoral matrix of colonial India.

The modern state

As is well documented, the medieval European state governed mostly by not governing. That is to say, seldom did it interfere in most affairs of its subjects. Its main interest, then, was to extract levies. Its administrative scope was also far less limited. The modern state, by contrast, developed a more penetrative scope. Because of print media, transportation links and other innovations, it assumed what Giddens calls "heightened administrative power"[1] and thus went beyond mere extracting taxes to impact mundane life. Around the 16th century or so, observes Foucault, there was a "veritable explosion of the art of governing"[2] in Europe as a result of which state acquired the pastoral power manifest in its regulation of every facet of life, including the intimate zones of sexuality and care. It would be wrong to say

that the Indian colonial state had a similar pastoral power. But its administrative scope was surely more vast and far-reaching than that of its predecessor, the Mughal state. According to the political theorist, Sudipta Kaviraj, the pre-modern Indian state was of marginal significance to everyday life. It was barely interested in altering socio-religious order. "The state, far from being the force which created ... or changed this order," he argues, "was itself subject to its control."[3] In contrast, the role of colonial state was unusually far reaching. It played such an interventionist role in religion, law, education, census, language, and so on that it directly affected everyday life.[4]

Given its centrality, all social movements in the 19th century and later pertained to the role of the state even if their target were non-state actors. The anti-colonial movement, spearheaded by the Indian National Congress (hereafter Congress) under M. K. Gandhi's able leadership, was the largest. From the early twentieth century, its main goal became *swaraj*, self-rule. Clearly, self-rule was essentially about the state. It was in such a context that Maududi, still a teenager, appeared as a journalist on the scene. Initially, he was a devoted Congressman. He wrote laudatory biographies of Gandhi and Pundit Madanmohan Malaviya, a Congress revivalist leader who he called 'sailor of India's boat. 'In 1920, Maududi, believing in its mission for a secular, religiously composite, and free India, became an editor of *Muslim*, a newspaper published by the Jamiatul Ulema-e-Hind, an organization of ulema, and ally of the Congress. However, Maududi soon grew disenchanted with the Congress, which he believed favoured Hindus at the cost of Muslims.

From communalism to Islamism

In 1928, Maududi left Delhi for Hyderabad, capital of the Muslim princely state of the Nizams. There he devoted himself to studying Islam. Worried as he was about the decline of Muslim power, he offered a blueprint to the Nizams to revitalize it. It called for overhauling the education system and propagating a 'pure' Islam. To his dismay, the Nizams showed no interest in it. In 1932, he launched an Urdu journal, *Tarjumanul Koran* as a part of his own plan.

While busy with his studies, the elections of 1937 took Maududi by storm. Consequently, he moved first to communalism and finally to Islamism. Under the Government of India Act of 1935 introduced by the colonial state, elections to form provincial governments were held. The contest was mainly between the Congress and the Muslim League, a party of landed magnates who demanded a separate Muslim state, Pakistan. As such the League rejected the Congress' claim to represent Muslims. Yet, It lost the elections. The Congress clinched victory to form provincial Ministries. It was then that Maududi turned *Tarjuman* into a weapon against the Congress. He equated the policy of the Ministries (1937-39) with heralding a 'Hindu Raj.' He accused them of imposing Hindu culture on Muslim students in schools: schools were named Vidya Mandir (literally temple), which "smelled of Hindu religion." Muslim students were forced to wear the *dhoti* (a lower garment worn mostly by Hindu men) and sing the anti-Islamic Sanskrit anthem *vande matram*; while the curriculum elided or misrepresented Islam and unduly highlighted Hinduism. Maududi saw evidence of 'Hindu Raj' in the marginalization of Urdu as well. Clearly, Maududi's allegations pertained to the role of state - a role the pre-colonial state barely had.

After the elections of 1937, both Maududi and the League thus opposed the Congress. This did not make them friends, however. Actually, as the possibility of Pakistan's creation intensified so did Maududi's critique of the League. He criticized it for the absence of a Shari'a state from its agenda. In the late 1930s, the whole national politics revolved around the issue of state: the League demanded a separate Muslim state; the Congress attempted to avert it by having a secular state of united India; and the Indian Communist movement's agenda was to secure a socialist state. In a con-text where 'state' was the reigning vocabulary of politics, Maududi advanced his own, a Shari'a state. From this standpoint, he found the League un-Islamic. For him, there was no difference between the Congress and the League as both desired a secular state. He described the League as a "party of pagans," because its leaders did not know even elementary Islam. Nor did they quote, even mistakenly, the Qur'an in their meetings. Since the League had no agenda for a Shari'a state, Maududi declared that future Pakistan would be "*na-Pakistan*," a profane land. He even called it an "infidelic state of Muslims." It was for this reason that in 1941, he founded Jamaat-e-Islami as an alternative to both the Congress and the League. The Jamaat's Constitution described its goal as the establishment of *hukumat-e-ilahiya*, 'Islamic State.'

Theology of state, state of theology

To Maududi's amazement, there were only a few enthusiasts for *hukumat-e-ilahiya*. As a party of reputed ulema, the Jamiatul Ulma-e-Hind believed in a secular, composite India and did not regard 'state' as essential to Islam. Given the wholesale rejection of his ideology, Maududi realized that Muslims, in general, and ulema, in particular, would rally around him only if he proved, through the

Qur'an and hadith, why the state was basic to Islam. A radically new theology of the state was on the anvil.

It is not as if Maududi was oblivious to the all-encompassing nature of the modern state. In March 1938, he wrote in *Tarjuman*, "Now [the state] also decides what to wear or what not to wear ... what to teach your kids ... what language and script you adopt.... So, the state hasn't left untouched from its ultimate intervention even most peripheral is-sues of life." Not only did Maududi fully comprehend the nature of the modern state, his views also reflect a critique of the policies of provincial Ministries on issues of dress, language, curriculum, and religion. Considering 19th century approaches to understanding the state outdated, he remarked in the same issue: "The state is beginning to acquire the same status that God has in religion." Given the extremely interventionist role of the modern state and the manner in which it impinged on the daily lives of Muslims, he equated Islam with state and accordingly interpreted the Qur'an.

The bible of Maududi's political theology is the tract *Four Fundamental Concepts of the Koran* (1979),[5] where he argued that to know the "authentic objective" of the Qur'an it is crucial to grasp the "real and total" meaning of the four Quranic words: *ilah* (Allah), *rabb* (Lord), *ibadat* (worship) and *deen* (religion). He claimed that soon after the revelation, their real meaning was lost.

Maududi considered 'Allah' the most important word. His exposition on its meaning is premised on a distinction between the 'metaphysical' and 'worldly political' life which together constitute an organic whole. To be a Muslim is to worship Allah alone not just on the meta-physical plane but also

in political life because He is the master of both. Accordingly, Maududi contended that Allah must also be the "Ruler, Dictator (*aamir*), and Legislator" of the political domain.[6] Consequently, if someone claimed to be the ruler of a country his claim would be equivalent to a claim to be God on the metaphysical plane. Thus, to share political power with someone who disregards the laws of Allah, he declared, would be polytheism in the same sense as someone who worships an idol rather than God.[7] Elaborating on the meaning of *rabb*, a cognate term for Allah, he wrote that it was "synonymous with sovereignty, *sultani*."[8] Since he regarded sovereignty as basically political, he argued that Allah is also a "political rabb."[9] To believe in Allah is to un-questionably obey His laws, Shari'a, in the political realm. Thus *taghoot*, another Qur'anic word, does not just mean Satan or idol. It means a political order not based on Allah's sovereignty. He chided the ulema for reducing the meaning of *taghoot* to a literal idol. For Maududi, the Qur'anic injunction to worship Allah and shun *taghoot* meant fighting for a Shari'a state and rejecting all forms of non-Islamic polity.

In Maududi's formulation, like Allah, worship, also meant obeying the ultimate political authority. He lamented that Muslims had limited its meaning to worshiping Allah in metaphysical life alone and banished Him from their political life.[10] He furthermore equated rituals like prayer to military training and considered them as tools to achieve the goal of Islamic state, "prayer, fasting … provide preparation and training for the assumption of just power."[11] Likewise, Maududi interpreted *deen*, religion, politically, "The word of the contemporary age, the state, has ... approximated [the meaning of *deen*]."[12] Elsewhere, he wrote, "in reality, the word *deen* approximately has the same meaning

which the word state has in the contemporary age."[13] Many other theorizations of Maududi also echo the spirit of modern politics; for instance, the conceptualization of Islam as a movement and Muslims as a party. Interestingly, he introduced such innovative theorizations in the name of reclaiming 'pure' Islam.

Conclusion

The aim of this article has been to rethink the dynamics of state and Islamism. To this end, I have demonstrated that the reason why the state became foundational to Islamism was not due to Islamic theology that presumably fused religion and politics. Drawing on the writings and politics of Maududi, I have instead argued that it became basic to the Jamaat-e-Islami because of the expansion and unusual reach of the colonial Indian state and the ways in which it crucially impacted everyday life. Not surprisingly, Maududi interpreted the Qur'anic words - Allah, worship and religion - to mean state. The study of theology is important; far more important however are the political dynamics in which theology unfolds, wins, or loses salience.

Acknowledgements

Endnotes
[1] Anthony Giddens, *The Nation-State and Violence* (Cambridge, 1985), 256; also see Talal Asad, 'Europe against Islam, Islam in Europe' *The Muslim World*, no. 2 (1997): 183-95.

[2] Michael Foucault, 'What is Critique?» in *What is Enlightenment?* ed. James Schmidt (Berkeley, 1996), 383; and 'Afterward: The Subject and Power', in Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michael Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago, 1985).

[3] Kaviraj, 'The Modern State in India', in *Politics and the State in India*, ed. Zoya Hasan (Delhi: 1999), 40.

[4] Peter Van der Veer, 'The Ruined Center: Religion and Mass Politics in India', *Journal of International Affairs* 1 (1996) :254-77.

[5] Maududi, *Koran ki Chaar Bunyadi Istelahen* (Delhi, 1979[19411).

[6] Ibid., 28.

[7] Ibid., 29.

[8] Ibid., 79.

[9] Ibid., 73.

[10] Ibid., 81-98.

[11] Maududi, *Let Us be Muslims* (Delhi, 1983 [1940]), 291.

[12] Maududi, *Koran*, 108.

[13] *Tarjuman*, February 1941, 13.